

Condensation proceedings could hold up Pryor Road

half-diamond interchange

BY SEANN MCANALLY

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Construction of a half-diamond interchange at Pryor Road and I-470 may be delayed, partially because of condemnation proceedings against a local landowner.

Rick Orr, project manager with the Missouri Department of Transportation, said MoDOT is waiting for federal authorities to give the go-ahead to move forward with the project.

The bidding process was set to begin in late June, but federal

oversight has slowed things down. Orr said the bidding process may not begin until late July, which could prevent the interchange from being completed on schedule in August 2008.

"If we have to move the bid opening to July, I'm very doubtful we can make that date," Orr said.

The reason for the holdup is federal oversight regarding right of way issues.

Orr said the Federal Highway Administration oversees all road

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improvements adjacent to interstates, and is particularly watchful when the use of eminent domain is involved.

Orr referred to condemnation proceedings against Grace Associates, which owns six acres needed for part of the project. MoDOT used eminent domain when negotiations with the property owner broke down over the price of the land.

"We must give the Federal Highway Administration five weeks notice before we start the bidding process," Orr said. "We have most of the right of way, but they are very reluctant to let it go ahead. They're not being difficult, they just have a responsibility to the public."

According to court documents, Jackson County Circuit Court Judge Jack Grate has scheduled a hearing on MoDOT's condemnation petition for June 20.

Orr says in the meantime, MoDOT can move on with the project.

"We have about 70 percent of the property we need," Orr said. "We really don't have to access the Grace property to finish the interchange."

But MoDOT does need access to the Grace property to connect Pryor Road on the north side of I-470 to a bridge that goes over the interchange.

Orr said the rest of the project can be completed, and once access to the Grace property is secured, MoDOT can finish connecting Pryor Road to the bridge.

"Basically we'll just do that last," Orr said.

The project was part of the development agreement between the city and RED Development when the Summit Woods Crossing shopping center was approved several years ago.

When RED brought forward its proposal for similar shopping center, Summit Fair, last year, the City Council told the developer Summit Fair shops could not open until the interchange at Pryor Road and I-470 was completed, citing the already

poor traffic flow in the area.

The overall improvements call for interchanges at Pryor Road and Blue Parkway, as well as two bridges to connect the interchanges and additional lanes between Blue Parkway and Douglas Street. Funds for the project come from a 50-50 split between the Summit Woods public financing plan and state funds administered by MoDOT.

Jeff McKerrrow, city traffic engineer, said the project has taken much longer than city officials hoped, but that city staff's hands are tied while they wait for the wheels of state and federal government to turn.

"We'd hoped to have the project finished in 2006, but we never really required a specific timetable," McKerrrow said. "Our original timeline for the project was based on assumptions about how long inter-governmental negotiations would take."

Local homeowners associations — particularly at Bent Tree Bluffs — have expressed concerns that the city might allow Summit Fair to open anyway if the interchange is delayed beyond RED's planned opening date of fall 2008.

Chuck Owsley, public works director, said that would require a vote of the City Council, and said from a traffic engineering standpoint, he would not support Summit Fair opening without completion of the interchange.

One problem that seems to have been solved by the delay is potential danger to the habitat of an endangered bat.

Earlier this year, state officials had concerns about the Indiana bat, an endangered species that makes its summer habitat in trees with loose bark. Orr said those types of trees are prevalent in the Pryor Road and I-470 area.

Orr said without access to the Grace property, there is no way to be certain if these bats are there. However, in September the bats would return to nearby mines to mate and hibernate for the winter.

Orr does not expect any work to occur on the Grace property before September, so those concerns have been eliminated for now.

John Summit Dubuque
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